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ABSTRACT

Important reasons exist for differences among the various genres in children's literature, related to the emotional and intellectual development of the reader. The themes presented in good children's fiction are always the same ones, no matter what the age: the need for love, the importance of close attachments, the fear of abandonment and separation, the need for self acceptance, to name a few. It is important to have an informed sense of which books generally appeal to kids at a certain age and why they do every time a parent or friend sets out to buy, read, or create a book for children. This paper considers what kind of books enhances the development of the individual child from infancy to adolescence. The paper discusses what to look for: in choosing books for infants, in choosing picture books for children ages 3 and up, in choosing books for beginning readers, in choosing transition books (for ages 7 through 9), in choosing books for middle grade readers (about Grades 3 through 7), and finally, in choosing young adult fiction. (Contains 24 references.) (NKA)

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Inside the Mind of a Child: Selecting Literature Appropriate to the Developmental Age of Children.

by Joanne Rocklin

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INSIDE THE MIND OF THE CHILD:

Selecting Literature Appropriate to the Developmental Age of Children

by Joanne Rocklin, Ph.D.

When I sit down to write a children's book, a child's voice emerges. I almost become that child as I write, returning, in my mind, to those long-ago days. But I have discovered there are many children's voices inside of me. As I write, the book itself takes on a particular shape and content, depending on the age of the child I am imagining. Sometimes I unconsciously create these differences; often I bring what I've observed as a parent, reader, teacher, and psychologist to the task. There are important reasons for these differences among the various genres in children's literature, related to the emotional and intellectual development of the reader.

Let me begin with several disclaimers:

- I believe that the themes presented in good children's works of fiction are always the same no matter what the age: the need for love, the importance of close attachments, the fear of abandonment and separation, the need for self-acceptance, to name a few. It is just the packaging, the presentation in terms of language and tone, that changes from age to age.
- I think that there is always a little bit of hope offered in any good children's book, even if it's just a tiny bit of growth, change, understanding on the part of a main character. Actually, the presence of hope may be the defining aspect most often distinguishing children's from adult's literature.
- There are exceptions to every rule; each genre includes examples of books that defy expectation. Nevertheless, I think it's important to have an informed sense of which books generally appeal to kids at a certain age and why they do so, every time we set about to buy, read or create a book for children.

So let's start at the beginning.

BOOKS FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Warm, comforting parent. Bright, cardboard thing in parent's hand. Tadah! That bright, cardboard thing becomes warm and comforting, too. When the parent isn't around, the book retains the flavor and memory of the parent, becoming what psychologists call a "transitional object", just like a "blankie" or a favorite stuffed animal. Thus a reader is born because of the simple psychological processes of conditioning and association. Hopefully, for the rest of the child's life, a book remains something warm and comforting like a blankie, reminiscent of the lovely primitive experience of being held. What kinds of books will enhance this wonderful conditioning process for the infant?

- Books emphasizing the senses. Brightly colored ones, with familiar, uncomplicated images on a page, so the baby can focus easily. Tasty ones, and I'm being only slightly facetious now! Textured or smelly ones, like PAT THE BUNNY (Kunhardt, 1998).
- Books emphasizing the 3 "R's", and that's not Readin', Ritin' and 'Rithmetic, even though reading to a child stimulates language and conceptual development as well as reinforcing an understanding of the concept of reading. The 3 R's I am referring to are Repetition, Rhythm and Rhyme, exemplified by those old nursery rhymes we know so well. These 3 R's give baby a comforting, secure feeling. Rhythm, rhyme and repetition make the world seem less chaotic. The baby feels she can control her world by anticipating a rhythm, rhyme or lovely refrain. She feels satisfaction and security when the rhyme or refrain reappears, when the book is exactly the same after having been read again and again. The developing toddler is learning a marvelous principle at this point, what the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget called object permanence. Wow! objects still exist even when they are out of sight! the baby marvels.
- Books using what I call "Boo!" humor, also explained by the concept of object permanence. The funniest joke at this age is the peek-a-boo game, with its element of

surprise and then great relief as the toddler discovers you haven't really disappeared! Scary, startling surprises followed by relief, (the most primitive form of humor) are always popular in books for this age. THE WIDE-MOUTHED FROG (Faulkner, 1996) is a terrific example.

By the end of this period (Piaget's sensorimotor period) the toddler is beginning to hold an image in her mind for longer periods, anticipating what will happen next. This is the beginning of the ability to understand story, and so we come to the next stage.

PICTURE BOOKS

A picture book encompasses several necessary defining features reflecting the developmental age of the child (ages three and up):

- It is quite short, almost always only 32 pages. Because of the restrictions of the printing process, books are bound in what are called "signatures" (big sheets on which usually eight pages of the book are printed). Of course there is another reason for its short length - one must be able to be read the picture book to a child in one sitting. Anyone who has had contact with a three-year-old understands the meaning of "short attention span"!
- The story is child-centered, i.e. there is usually a simple plot based on everyday situations in a child's life. The parent is often a silent, perhaps unseen, figure in the background. There is a rehearsal for separation , allowing the main character to have adventures while the adult is still somewhere nearby to help. (Roberts, 1981, p. 50) A good example of this is in WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE (Sendak, 1963).
- Fantasy is another feature in the picture book which conforms to the thought processes of the young child. Fairy tales have had enduring power throughout the ages for this very reason. Piaget and others have demonstrated (and parents intuitively know) that children endow inanimate objects and animals with feelings and opinions (animism), that they believe the whole world thinks and feels as they do (egocentrism) and that

they often believe in magic. So it is quite acceptable to the child that storybook characters range from children to animals to fantasy creatures (monsters, fairies), even anthropomorphic creatures as in THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD (Piper, 1978). But - and this is key- the main character is almost always a child in disguise. The animals behave like the species they are portraying (bears enjoying honey and hibernating, for example) but with child-like feelings and needs. Notice how often mice are chosen to portray a main character. They're the animal counterpart to the child: timid, cute, small, and rambunctious. Even adult main characters are child-like, as in BIG ANTHONY AND THE MAGIC RING (dePaola, 1987) and STREGA NONA: AN OLD TALE (dePaola, 1989). The reason for the disguise is to give the listener a measure of distance and safety from weighty life issues. Creating fantasy characters who are not exactly like the child reader allows time and space to deal with big feelings.

Which brings me to the next feature of picture books:

- There is usually a conflict which the main character must handle himself. In a satisfying picture book, nothing is solved by coincidence or magic, a parent, or God. This allows for a bit of growth at the end of the book for both main character and reader, and thus, a sense of hope. Sylvester deals with the pain and terror of separation in the wonderful SYLVESTER AND THE MAGIC PEBBLE (Steig, 1969); sibling rivalry is faced in JULIUS, THE BABY OF THE WORLD (Henkes, 1990). These are weighty problems solved in their own way by these books' main characters. And they are problems similar to those the reader must solve in real life at this age, even if the settings are of a fantasy world.
- Humor in picture books, as in earlier books, still deals with that element of surprise and silliness. It is very physical and visual, almost slapstick. See A PILE OF PIGS (Enderle and Tessler, 1993) or HATTIE AND THE FOX (Mem Fox, 1987).
- Endings are very important. Funny endings, surprise endings, quiet, "that's the only way it could be" endings. There must be a sense of closure. A picture book is often

read during a quiet, relaxed time such as before naptime or bedtime. The adult doesn't want to send the child off to that scary dark void called Sleep with loose story-ends hanging.

- The language of picture books is rich, evocative and sensuous. It has to be worthy of being read aloud. Rhyme, cumulative refrains, rhythm, alliteration, metaphor, simile, all the properties of good poetry can be employed.
- And of course there is that defining feature of the picture book: the unique relationship between language and illustration. The author has a very difficult and contradictory task: the words must be beautiful but spare at the same time. They must evoke visual imagery with few adjectives, gaining power mostly from strong verbs. In other words, the writer has to leave something for the illustrator to illustrate, or even interpret, in his or her own way. Why is it so important for there to be that melding of words and pictures in the picture book? Because the listener is an emergent reader at this stage.

"The picture book uses illustrations to draw children into the world of words. For the child to whom reading is uncharted territory, pictures provide a map of what is to come." (Roberts, 1981, p. 4)

And what is to come? Reading on one's own!

BEGINNING READERS

The next type of book, variously known as the "easy reader" "beginning reader" or "easy-to-read" is written for six- to eight-year-olds and ranges in length from 32 to 48 pages. But these books are much more than "easy readers". They reflect the developmental needs of their readers, especially the fact that they are learning to read independently. This is a very important part of the definition because their form follows this function. The child is reading the book independently, turning the pages on her own,

perhaps for the first time. And how do good easy readers help and entice the child to do just that?

- First of all, the publisher entices the early reader with the more grown-up look. The book is smaller, even though the type is larger.

My job as a writer is to grab the reader by the collar, to do everything I can to keep that reader turning the page! For the first time there's no adult to do it for him, so I've got to motivate him to do it himself. Of course, I try to use all the principles of all good writing, with some different twists for the early reader:

- Although I am always aware that my audience is learning to read, I'm not restricted by grade levels or vocabulary lists. I just use my common sense, writing in simple, short sentences: subject, verb, object. If it's a choice between using a two-syllable word and a three-syllable one, I use the former. If I do introduce an interesting "hard" word, I try to make sure the reader would be able to sound it out, or figure it out from the story's context or an illustration. A few words have to imply a lot, leaving room for the illustrations to show details. This does not make for boring, dull stuff. Good easy reads can still sound like poetry. And the easy reader, I feel, particularly lends itself to the spare, first-person writing of the mystery, with its irony and deadpan humor. I've thoroughly enjoyed writing my own early reader hard-boiled thrillers. Kids don't mind a "hard" word or two if the book has them captivated.
- The character and reader are close in age, with similar problems to solve- problems related to friendship, fears of the unknown and the known, siblings or school. And even when writing about animals or imaginary creatures, they are still children, early readers, in disguise.
- The settings, too, relate closely to the readers' lives, concentrating on family, the immediate neighborhood, and school. Even in a work of historical fiction, the character's concerns are still relevant to today's beginning reader. See how Nancy

Smiler Levinson does this in her well-researched SNOWSHOE THOMPSON (Levinson, 1992).

- There is always a strong plot with plenty of action. Turning pages is the goal, so there is much less description and introspection as compared to other genres. Almost every sentence is a piece of action, serving to solve a problem and move the story along.
- There is lots and lots of dialogue, which is another form of action. Kids at this age love to read dialogue, especially with sound effects. And it helps them identify characters quickly.
- If there are chapters, they are short and self-contained, with a definite beginning, middle and end. This provides a satisfying reading experience for the young reader in one sitting . There are few cliff-hangers in the easy read.
- The humor in these books also reflects the age of the reader. Let's return to that great developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, and his principles of conservation and reversibility:

If you show a four or five-year-old (the child of the picture book age) a ball of clay, and then you take the same piece of clay and roll it into a hot-dog shape, he's probably going to say that the newly-shaped piece is bigger than before, that there's more clay. In other words, he doesn't understand that the amount of clay is conserved, no matter what you do to it, and that its shape is reversible. But the seven-year-old, the early reader, understands all that. "Of course it's the same size, silly!" she'll say. And when a story describes someone who doesn't understand logical stuff like that, who is overly literal about the world, the seven-year-old finds that very funny.

Here's an example of this humorous concreteness from my own beginning reader, THREE SMART PALS (Rocklin, 1994):

"I want to race!" said Hal.

How can I race alone?"

"Race with the clock!" said Sal.

"Silly," said Hal. "Clocks can't swim!"

As Michael Cart points out in his book WHAT'S SO FUNNY? (Cart, 1995), kids love logical illogic, or logical nonsense at this age. They love feeling superior to those who just don't get it, a sibling, for example, or a fictional character. That's why they love FROG AND TOAD ARE FRIENDS (Lobel, 1970), two friends who explain the world to one another, and AMELIA BEDELIA (Parish, 1992), who "cleverly" gets the spot out of the Dress by literally cutting out the polka dots. And the early reader is now intellectually able to keep two ideas or word meanings in mind simultaneously. Thus they love inventive, silly wordplay and riddles.

Logical nonsense, literalness, feeling superior, this is the stuff of humor in the beginning reader. But let's not forget slapstick and physical humor. As author Betsy Byars has pointed out in her talks to aspiring children's authors, the most hilarious word among seven-year-olds is still "underwear"!

TRANSITION BOOKS

A step up the developmental ladder between easy readers and middle grade books is another group of books with multiple names. Variously called "early chapter books or novels", "bridge books" or "transition books", they are written for kids between the ages of seven through nine years old in second through third (sometimes fourth) grade. There are many similarities to easy readers as well as a few important differences, which, again, relate to the readers' developmental stage.

- Like easy readers, these books are relatively short, commensurate with the attention span and reading level of the young reader. They range from approximately 55 to 80

pages with eight to ten short chapters. The time-frame for the story itself is short, as well - a few days or less than a month. In my own chapter book, THE VERY BEST HANUKKAH GIFT (Rocklin, 1999), I was conveniently able to tell my whole story within the time-frame of the week of Hanukkah, with each chapter representing one day or night of the holiday.

- There is still lots of dialogue, although the writing may graduate from simple to compound sentences, more description and longer paragraphs.
- As with early readers, the settings of young chapter books are mostly familiar and contemporary. Thus, HORRIBLE HARRY AND THE GREEN SLIME (Kline, 1989), and THE BEAST IN MS. ROONEY'S ROOM (Giff, 1984) present chapters depicting amusing and recognizable incidents at school, at home or around the neighborhood with friends. Some notable exceptions are the groundbreaking historical works MOLLY'S PILGRIM (Cohen, 1988) and the Newbery winner, SARAH, PLAIN AND TALL (MacLachlan, 1985).
- Transition novels always have chapters. As in easy readers, each chapter is often self-contained, i.e. with a definite beginning, middle and end which can be read in one sitting, with the occasional cliffhanger ending. The chapters are usually thematically related, dealing in some way with the main character's problem or concern. I like to conceptualize early chapter books as generally character-driven, rather than plot-driven. For example in RAMONA AND HER FATHER (Cleary, 1988) Ramona learns what makes a happy family. Her character grows a bit more in each self-contained chapter, with a final understanding achieved at the end of the book. The main character, like the reader, is more complex, anticipating the complexities of the next developmental stage.

MIDDLE GRADE FICTION

This genre is for the "middle grade" years, as the name implies: grades three through seven, depending on reading level and maturity. Readers are generally eight to

twelve years old. The best of the middle grade books clearly relate to the developmental age in several ways.

- Character is all-important, perhaps even more important than in the other genres. The genres for younger children reflect the intellectual and emotional needs of their readers mainly with regard to form, in terms of language, length, and the melding of words and illustrations. Novels for the middle grade and young adult, however, reflect their readers' needs mainly with regard to content, and more specifically, character.
- The main character of the middle grade is self-absorbed, reflecting the self-absorption of the age itself. In my novel, FOR YOUR EYES ONLY! (Rocklin, 1987), written in the form of a letters to a beloved teacher, Lucy experiments with name changes and different handwriting styles. She worries about her lovableness, her looks, her ability to write a poem. She worries about her relationships with her peers and siblings, and compares herself to others. Many middle grades are written in first-person or in the form of a diary or letters. These forms reflect the young narrators' discovery of the power and beauty of language, their self-absorption, as well as allowing an exploration of identity issues. And even when books are not written in first-person or journal form, there is much more internal dialogue and brooding.
- The main character of these books must have immediate appeal. Middle graders have the psychological ability to recognize and identify with their characters, and they want to do it immediately. Very often I've observed middle grade readers in the library pulling books off the shelves. The books are quickly chosen because of an interesting cover, a snappy title, or intriguing dialogue in the first sentence of two. "*Where's Papa going with that ax?*" asks Fern in CHARLOTTE'S WEB, (White, 1952) arguably the best middle grade opening sentence ever written! This doesn't mean that the characters have to be exact reflections of the modern day reader. In STRUDEL STORIES (Rocklin, 1999), a novel encompassing stories told by one fictional family over the course of one hundred years, the girls and women in nineteenth century Europe lived

vastly different lives from today. But I did try to grab the reader immediately using the commonality of the human condition, and of being young in a turbulent world. The reality is we are living in a speedy T.V. and cyberspace culture and the books have to have immediate appeal. I won't argue the merits of this--the most important goal is to get kids reading.

- And, most importantly, like their readers, the main character of a middle grade novel is in conflict-- with himself, with authority, or with nature, in other words, experiencing being human. Of course, conflict is always a key in every good story, but in the middle grade novel the conflicts are out in the open. There is no need to distance the reader from the main character in the guise of an animal or other transformation, as in the picture book. All of Gilly Hopkins' conflicts are up front in THE GREAT GILLY HOPKINS (Paterson, 1978); there is conflict with nature in Gary Paulsen's novels. Conflict is part of the separation process in the middle years, which involves lots of deep feeling, and often anger. This conflict is connected with something the main character wants very much but is having trouble getting. Leigh Botts poignantly addresses how much he misses his dad in DEAR MR. HENSHAW (Cleary, 1983) ; at the same time he struggles with his own anger at the separation. Annemarie Johannesen's desire to help her persecuted friends couldn't be any clearer in NUMBER THE STARS (Lowry, 1989). I myself like to start my story on a day or during a specific period that is different for my character that relates in some way to a conflict or desire. In FOR YOUR EYES ONLY! (Rocklin, 1997) a substitute teacher takes over the class and Lucy develops an almost immediate crush on him. In my novel STRUDEL STORIES (Rocklin, 1999), a grandfather has died. And in CHARLOTTE'S WEB, (White, 1952) the reader knows that ax is certainly a problem for somebody! Again, middle graders want to jump into the story-conflict immediately.
- The structure of the book, too, reflects the readers ability and desire to tolerate conflict. Middle grade readers can now tolerate more cliffhangers at the end of chapters, with the

tension often sustained until the very last page. Compare this to the episodic, self-contained chapters often found in books for younger readers.

- Finally, the main character experiences growth and change at the end of the book. Endings in middle grade novels are developmentally related to what the reader is now able to understand about life. Sometimes the main character doesn't get what she wants but has still grown and achieved understanding. In other words, there is often true change in character, not merely the solving of a problem.

YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Young adult fiction encompasses all of the above features of middle grade fiction, reflecting similar needs in its readers. However, there are important differences when writing for young adults. These differences go beyond merely creating teenage characters who express the interests and culture of that particular age group.

- In the middle grade novel the conflicts experienced take place in the immediate environment of family, school, friends and neighborhood. So do those in YA fiction, yet these conflicts also reflect larger issues in the world at large. I AM THE CHEESE (Cormier, 1977) takes place in an imagined world of espionage and extreme government control. THE GIVER (Lowry, 1993) forces the reader to examine the meaning of freedom.
- Protagonists in YA's experience internal growth and understanding, but often the larger conflicts in the external world are outside of their direct control. Dark, ambivalent or tragic endings in young adult novels sometimes reflect this situation. In THE GIVER (Lowry, 1993), Jonas escapes the world he has known, but the rest of his story must be imagined. The reader is left with questions, as well as a powerful understanding and feeling of empathy. Mature readers are able to tolerate and appreciate this ambivalence at the end of the book.

Finally, I would like to end with the words of one of my favorite thinkers, Ramona Quimby:

...grown-ups were often stupid about presents. Ramona knew. She had been given books "to grow into," and by the time she had grown into them, they had lain around so long they no longer looked interesting. (Cleary, 1984)

Ramona understands (as Beverly Cleary certainly does) the importance of selecting literature appropriate to the developmental age of the child. This is not to say we can't give our children books to stretch and inspire them. But I believe we should aim to inspire not the idealized children, the children we wish they were, but the living, breathing kids in our lives. The ones we hope will fall in love with books forever.

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